

State ponders Allston road project, a potential traffic nightmare for MetroWest drivers

By Chris Lisinski State House News Service

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BOSTON — The Department of Transportation continues to explore ways to mitigate what are expected to be significant impacts from a decade-long infrastructure project planned for Allston, Transportation Secretary Stephanie Pollack said Monday.

At a board meeting, a range of interested parties voiced concern with draft construction plans, particularly about how commuters would be affected by a reduction in access to the Worcester/Framingham Line's tracks and the environmental impacts of a temporary road built on the Charles River.

Many did not criticize the project's goals, but said the impacts on the community will be vast during the years of construction.

"Disruption is too weak a word for what is coming to Boston commuters from the west once the I-90 Allston Multimodal Project gets underway in 2022," said Mary Connaughton, the right-leaning Pioneer Institute's director of government transparency and director of finance and administration.

The effort, referred to as the Allston Multimodal Project, would be one of the most sweeping infrastructure efforts in the state, encompassing construction of a commuter rail station, realignment of the Massachusetts Turnpike, the opening up of Harvard University land for development, and more over a period of eight to 10 years.

During that span, the Turnpike may be reduced to three lanes of travel in each direction. For up to half of the project, the Worcester/Framingham Line may be cut down from two tracks to one — likely creating delays.

After the scoping documents were released last year, Pollack said community members provided “more and broader feedback” than state officials expected at this point in the project.

“We are still sorting through that and trying to understand what folks are asking for and what we can do and where the different key stakeholders — other state agencies, city of Boston, federal highway — stand,” Pollack said during the meeting, adding that the comments are “being taken very seriously.”

The department received about 800 comment letters and 1,600 total comments on the environmental scoping report, project head Michael O’Dowd told the department’s board of directors on Monday.

Speakers at Monday’s meeting pushed for MassDOT to ensure that the planned new West Station commuter rail stop would have four tracks, not three, to meet potential future growth in demand. They also warned that limiting service on the Worcester Line during construction while simultaneously constricting the Turnpike will create commuting headaches with no relief.

“As a congested state, we cannot push more people onto that road,” said Ari Ofsevit, the project lead for the Livable Streets Alliance.

Some asked the department to provide more information about how it plans to construct a temporary Soldiers Field Road on the Charles River, including whether the structure can be closer to the bank rather than 100 feet out into the river, as planned, and what kind of materials would be used to fill the river.

“MassDOT must provide evidence that any adverse impacts on the Charles River will be minimized and mitigated,” said Conservation Law Foundation Senior Attorney Staci Rubin.

Department staff are investigating several suggestions made during the public feedback process, officials said, citing both a four-track West Station and how to minimize impacts on the Worcester Line from single-tracking as areas of additional study.

“It’s incumbent upon us to try and exhaust ways of maintaining that two-track service during all phases,” O’Dowd said during his presentation to the board.

MassDOT will provide a “more robust” update on the planning process in March, Pollack said.

If design, permitting and contracting follows the expected timeline, construction on the project could begin in 2022 and last eight to 10 years.